

Occupational Hearing Conservation Team: Mission, Training and Role

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Purpose

1) To introduce the concept and structure of occupational hearing conservation. 2) To discuss the role of the Council for Accreditation in Occupational Hearing Conservation (CAOHC) in formal training and implementation of strategies for hearing conservation.

Chapter Topics

- The Need for a Hearing Conservation Program (HCP) and Training
- Regulatory Requirements
- Guidelines and Structure of the CAOHC Hearing Conservation Course
- Profile of HCP Team and Roles
- About this Manual

The Need for a Hearing Conservation Program (HCP) and Training

We survive and interact in the world by using our five senses: taste, touch, smell, vision and hearing. We often describe hearing as the most important because it allows us to experience music, laughter, and nature. We depend on hearing to keep us safe by providing information on distance, direction and type of risk. Most important, however, hearing allows us to understand voices and communicate. Without good hearing, vital connections between people and the environment are degraded or lost. Despite the obvious importance of hearing, many risk its loss by being exposed, often needlessly, to high noise levels and other potentially damaging agents.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention notes that 22 million American workers are exposed to **hazardous noise** on the job, while another 9 million are at risk for hearing loss from agents (eg, solvents, metals).¹ In examining historical trends, the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) found that men were more than 2.5 times more likely to have hearing loss than women. The percentage of workers with hearing loss increases with age, from 3% among workers ages 18-25, to 56% among workers ages 56-65. Not surprisingly, mining, quarrying, oil and gas extraction, construction

and manufacturing were the industrial sectors with the highest prevalence of hearing loss.² The estimated economic impact of disability alone for occupational **noise-induced hearing loss** (NIHL) in the United States is more than \$240 million per year.³

Hearing loss occurs for reasons other than occupational noise exposure (eg, hereditary impairments, ear infections, diseases, physical trauma). For the most part, hearing loss from sources other than noise is usually sudden, often associated with a specific event and typically not under the individual's control. Hearing loss from noise may be sudden and related to a single event. However, most occupational hearing loss is *progressive*, gradually worsening over many years of exposure; *painless*, going unnoticed until significant damage is done; and *permanent* so that hearing will never be as sharp as it once was. When someone experiences even partial hearing loss due to noise, disability costs—if measured at all—capture only the direct economic impact of the most severe cases; the influences of hearing loss on work production, increased safety risks and reduced quality of life are not captured.

Fortunately, NIHL is completely *preventable*. But prevention requires implementation and execution of an effective **hearing conservation program** (HCP) according to regulatory requirements. Administration of an HCP requires monitoring, measuring, documenting, and educating and counseling workers. A well-trained, certified and motivated **occupational hearing conservationist** (OHC) can do all these things. In recognition of the need for the preparation of those who train and carry out the various aspects of HCPs, several organizations came together, more than 50 years ago, with a vision to do so. Drawing upon resources and expertise of several **component professional organizations** (CPOs) the Council for Accreditation in Occupational Hearing Conservation (CAOHC) was formed.

The representative members of these organizations, the "Council," are the heart of CAOHC. Each organization appoints its representatives for specified terms, and the Council elects a chair, vice chair, and secretary/treasurer and employs an executive director to handle administrative matters. CAOHC is the recognized U.S. authority on training OHCs, **course directors** (CDs), and **professional supervisors** (PSs) of the audiometric monitoring program. The Council develops and periodically re-